

GROUPS

Lesbian Sing. That was the sign, posted at a women's gathering in 1986, that announced the birth of the Portland Lesbian Choir. The group will celebrate 15 years of out and proud crooning with its spring concert, *A Musical Scrapbook*, April 7.

In 1986, long before lesbians were considered chic, declaring themselves to be singing dykes was a bold political statement. Even now, few choirs in the country sport the word "lesbian" in their titles.

Sparky Lindsay, one of the founding members, is afraid some people miss the point. "It's gotten away from what it started out as—we were just saying who we were." She notes the group is not exclusive. "We've always been open to all women."

Through the years the choir has compiled an impressive list of accomplishments. The '80s were more political with activities such as touring the state during Oregon Citizens Alliance ballot measure fights and benefit concerts supporting AIDS organizations. Choir director Teri Beemer says politics is no longer so high on the agenda.

"We really need to look at what the community needs right now; how do we change the face of how we present ourselves?" she muses. "Are we all about political, or are we about living our lives in a gay-positive manner?"

Celebrating gay culture—and lesbians in particular—is something at which PLC always has excelled. They are fixtures at International Women's Day (the site of their first performance in 1987) and Portland's annual Gay Pride celebration as well as performing annual fall and spring concerts.

Numbers such as "I Like Being a Dyke" proclaim their pride, and they try on different styles—everything from Holly Near to Sweet Honey in the Rock. And they've always had a sense of humor. Captain & Tennille's "The Way That I Want to Touch You" gets a whole new spin in the hands of PLC. They've also had works commissioned for them by Portland women composers.

The choir has experimented with different formats in the past few years, including a coffeehouse performance featuring Portland artists and a spring show guest-starring opera diva Diane Syrle. In addition to exposing fans to a little culture, she hammed it up appearing as Xena: Warrior Princess in a hilarious Gilbert and Sullivan parody.

PLC are women on the move. In 1989 they performed at the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses festival, which drew groups from all over the world. Since then they have traveled to four GALA festivals, most recently in San José, Calif.

The choir also has a CD to its credit, *Making Light*, which was recorded during its 10th anniversary season and is still available at performances.

Beemer is excited about this year's celebration. "It's going to be fun.... There will be stories throughout the concert highlighting moments from the past 15 years. I like recording history and sharing the funnier stuff with

the audience—so they can share in the life of the choir behind the scenes."

Because the show is at Hollywood Theatre, they might have a video during intermission, Beemer says, "of different concerts through the years. Old members can come and see themselves, see how the choir looked, reminisce and laugh."

After five years with the choir—sometimes as accompanist, sometimes as director—Beemer says she definitely is settling in. Oddly, when she joined, she wasn't looking for a big commitment. "I had just moved here from Seattle, and I wanted a group where I didn't have any responsibility.... In Seattle Women's Ensemble, I had played and done lots of [other] stuff, and I was worn out."

Cindy Zrinyi, also an original member, agrees with Beemer about the emotional joys that singing can provide. "For me, it's not just about the social aspect but also the whole physical, spiritual and emotional well-being that comes from singing. It's greater than just making sound with your voice; when you're making sound with other people, it takes you places!" she exclaims. "It's a really wonderful experience."

Although the singers express a lot of satisfaction with the group, and rehearsals are punctuated with laughter and good-natured flirting, the melodious women still need an audience to complete the journey. Historically, there's been a noticeable difference in size between PLC audiences and those of their well-known counterpart, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus.

The support "is minimal—that's the struggle," Beemer explains. "The women's events tend to bring in fewer people than the men's. I'm not entirely sure why that is."

Andrea Raven, a member with her partner, Sheri, has a theory. "I don't think it's a matter of people not wanting to support us but more about our definition of who we are. We're more of an informal choir; we don't have a person whose specific job is doing publicity."

Despite the difference in audience base, the relationship between PLC and PGM is very friendly. Raven adds, "The men's chorus has been very supportive of us...they treat us like a younger sister."

Lindsay points out that both styles of chorus are valuable. "We're very different, and both are needed."

A couple of performers with whom the choir definitely didn't want to compete were Chris Williamson and Holly Near. They moved their original performance date to avoid conflicting with that concert. Beemer admits it wasn't just a fear of losing

potential audience members. "Half the choir said, 'Well, if I have to make a choice...'"

PLC will be accepting new members in September. Reina Abolofia, who joined this season, can attest you'll be welcomed with open arms. "When I came on the first day, everyone was so nice, and people really cared about me—that made me want to stay." ☐

The PORTLAND LESBIAN CHOIR performs *A Musical Scrapbook* 5 p.m. April 7 at Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd. Tickets are \$14 at the door or \$12 advance from choir members, *It's My Pleasure* or *In Other Words*. The concert will be followed by a dance with DJ Lauren. Visit the harmonious dykes at www.plchoir.org.

KRONDA ADAIR is a retired PLC member who still sings in the shower and while riding her bike. Catch her seven-word solo on the *Making Light* CD (if you can) or write her at ephany@myjexcel.com.

Lesbian sing

The Portland Lesbian Choir takes a walk down memory lane

BY KRONDA ADAIR



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

The Portland Lesbian Choir looks forward to sharing 15 years of history with *A Musical Scrapbook*; Choir director Teri Beemer feels energized by every rehearsal



Her timing, however, landed her in PLC during the start of a hectic transitional period. Halfway through her first season, director Lynda Gamer resigned, and Beemer stepped up to the plate. "That was just an awesome task, because I hardly knew anybody's names in the group...and they had really hard music. The choir scheduled extra rehearsals and really stepped up to the challenge."

After that, Beemer went back and forth between tickling the keys and directing. Meanwhile, the choir changed, too. "We're smaller now, and that's good and bad," Beemer says. "People get to know each other well...these women care about each other, and we work hard to accept each other with all the varying personalities that come and go...and we really care about the quality of the music."

Still, she'd like to see the choir a bit bigger, especially to help the less accomplished members, she notes, "who might need more experienced singers to lean on until they find their voice."

Although directing is a lot more responsibility, Beemer enjoys the challenge. "They energize me a lot," she asserts. "We gain energy from each other as we go. I like the unity."



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